

What's the Difference Between a Fear and a Phobia?



Phobias come in many different forms. Acrophobia is the fear of heights. Trypanophobia is the fear of needles. Hodophobia is the fear of traveling. Phobias are one of the most common mental health disorders with 11% of people experiencing at least one phobia over her/his lifespan. So what is the difference between a fear and a phobia?

Fears have a protective purpose. They make us alert to danger and prepare us to deal with it. Phobias involve the experience of persistent fear that is excessive and unreasonable. A fear of being hit by lightning during a thunderstorm will result in most of us leaving the beach when a thunderstorm pops up. Most would call this a reasonable, if not healthy fear. Once the thunderstorm clears, we go back onto the beach. Those with a phobia about being struck by lightning, which is called astraphobia, may find it difficult to even venture outside with a concern that a thunderstorm could pop up anytime. The key to distinguishing a fear from a phobia is whether the person is physically and/or psychologically impaired by her/his worry. In short, a phobia is a fear of being afraid. It results in a person limiting or eliminating normal life activities just to avoid the triggering object or event.

Most people generally don't seek treatment for phobias. Only 6% of people with a phobia ever go in for treatment. This low treatment rate is due in part because those with a phobia are not totally disabled by it. Many are able to successfully create routines to avoid their trigger(s). Not before a person's phobia is extremely severe or life limiting does one typically seek help.

Even though phobias can be very disabling and downright exhausting, the great news is that phobias in children, adolescents and adults are also very treatable. If you'd like confidential assistance with a phobia or other anxiety disorders, call one of your local eap committee members. Their contact information can be found at https://www.afacwa.org/your_local_eap_rep or through the AFA EAP Helpline at 1-800-424-2406.